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# OPERATIONS OF THE SEVENTH UNITED STATES ARMY IN THE DEFENSE OF ALSACE AND LORRAINE 31 DECEMBER, 1944 - 26 JANUARY, 1945 (ARDENNES - ALSACE CAMPAIGN)

Type of operation described: FIELD ARMY IN THE DEFENSE OF AN EXTENDED SECTOR OVER WIDELY VARYING TERRAIN.

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# OPERATIONS OF THE SEVENTH UNITED STATES ARMY IN THE DEFENSE OF ALSACE AND LORRAINE 31 DECEMBER, 1944 - 26 JANUARY, 1945 (ARDENNES - ALSACE CAMPAIGN)

## INTRODUCTION

This monograph deals with the operations of the Seventh U. S. Army in repelling a major counteroffensive launched against their positions throughout the month of January, 1945, by the German First Army and units of Army Group Oberrhein.

For the purpose of providing background for the action described herein, a brief review of earlier Seventh Army operations is necessary.

Following their successful landings in Southern France in August, 1944, the Seventh Army, then consisting of the VI U.S. Corps and two French corps, advanced rapidly up the Rhone and Saone Valleys, making firm contact with the right flank of the Third U. S. Army on 12 September, near Chatillon-sur-Seine, about 40 miles northwest of Dijon, France. (1) (See Map A)

Following this junction, the Seventh Army, now augmented by the attachment of XV U. S. Corps, and operating on the left flank of 6th Army Group, attacked east and northeast through the Vosges Mountains, seized Strasbourg, and by 16 December had cleared most of Alsace and Lorraine. On the right, in the VI Corps sector, the army had crossed the German border and was engaged against Siegfried line positions. (2)

(1) A-3, p. 55-57; (2) A-3, p. 69.

At this stage of the campaign, all factors seemed to indicate that the Seventh Army would shortly launch an offensive northward along the eastern slopes of the Hardt Mountains, coordinated with an attack by the Third Army across the Moselle River. (3)

It was at this time however, that the German Army launched the Ardennes counteroffensive, and the regrouping of Allied forces had a decisive effect upon the plans of Seventh Army. At a meeting of the Allied high command held in Verdun on 19 December it was decided that the Seventh Army would halt its offensive at once, and that the left flank of the 6th Army Group would be considerably extended in order to relieve Third Army troops for employment in a counterattack against the German south flank in the Ardennes. This extension of the flank, to a point slightly north of St. Avold, increased the army frontage by approximately 30 miles, and lengthened the total front from St. Avold to the Rhine River to 84 miles. In addition the army had a front of approximately 40 miles along the Rhine from Lauterbourg to Strasbourg. (4)

Relief of Third Army units in the extended sector was completed by 26 December. (5) Because of the lengthened front, the decision was reached at the 19 December meeting in Verdun that 6th Army Group would withdraw from any forward salient that would assist in conserving troops, and that in the event of an attack in force, would withdraw

(3) A-1, p. 494; A-15, p. 340; A-6, p. 29; (4) A-1, p. 495; A-4, p. 9; A-15, p. 351; (5) A-9, p. 52.

slowly all the way to the eastern edge of the Vosges Mountains, if the German pressure made a withdrawal of this depth necessary. (6)

In accordance with this decision, 6th Army Group instructions of 21 December directed Seventh Army "to be prepared to yield ground rather than endanger the integrity of its forces". (7) Seventh Army units therefore made minor withdrawals from a few exposed positions, and all units commenced the consolidation and improvement of their defenses in the new sector. (8)

## THE GENERAL SITUATION

### Terrain and Weather

The lower Vosges Mountains constituted the dominant terrain feature in the Seventh Army sector during the period of these operations. (See Map B) This mountain range runs in a northerly and northeasterly direction from the Saverne Gap, extending to the German border, beyond which point the range is referred to as the Hardt Mountains. While not particularly high, the mountains reach elevations of 1600 feet in some localities, and are heavily wooded and steeply sloped, affording only limited observation and fields of fire.

Good east-west routes of communication through the mountains are very limited, the three routes worthy of mention

(6) A-15, p. 352; (7) A-1, p. 499; (8) A-1, p. 494.

being the following: (9)

Bitche - Niederbronn - Haguenau

Sarre Union - Wingen - Ingwiller

Phalsbourg - Saverne

The Alsace plain east of the mountains consists of rolling farm land, sloping generally to the northeast. It is broken by the Haguenau Forest, which is 18 miles long and 6 miles deep. The forest, while constituting an obstacle, was vulnerable to infiltration by the enemy if not held in strength, and tended to limit observation for both attacker and defender. (10)

The Rhine River, on the right of the sector, afforded flank protection of doubtful value. The river banks are low and swampy, with a number of islands, and the length of this flank made it difficult to hold it strongly. It was therefore vulnerable to infiltration tactics and continuous probing, with the possibility of a strong bridgehead being established by the enemy at an opportune time.

The Sarre Valley, to the west of the Lower Vosges, consists of gently rolling terrain, lightly wooded in sections. The Sarre River parallels the Vosges range about 10 miles west of the mountains.

In the event of a German attack through the valley between the river and the mountains, with the objective of seizing the Saverne Gap, the river would have provided right flank protection for the attacking force. (11)

Any enemy attack which could have reached the Saverne

(9) A-2, Annex III, p. 5; A-4, p. 9; (10) A-1, p. 459; (11) A-2, Annex III, p. 5.

Gap from the north would have gravely endangered the entire VI Corps.

The city of Strasbourg, with a normal population of 200,000, while it had no direct tactical significance, was politically important both to France and Germany. Any line of action involving withdrawal to the line of the Vosges would have returned the city to German control, a development sure to be bitterly opposed by the French. Similarly, there existed the possibility that a German attack of more limited scope might be launched for the purpose of capturing the city in order that the German people might be properly impressed with the resurgence of their army.

Cloudy, overcast weather was to be expected during the greater part of January, a factor favoring the Germans, since it would limit the activity of the superior tactical air power and artillery light plane observation of the American forces.

Enemy Forces and Capabilities.

During November, the Seventh Army had inflicted heavy losses on the units of the German First Army facing it and these units were dangerously low in effective infantry strength at the end of this period. (12) During the first two weeks of December, however, it had been possible for the enemy to disengage certain divisions and at the same time maintain a stubborn defense by reason of his withdrawal into the Maginot and Siegfried fortifications. All mobile ar-

(12) A-5, p. 10.

mored units (Panzer and Panzer Grenadier divisions) had been withdrawn from contact in this manner.

When the magnitude of the Ardennes counteroffensive became known, it was believed possible that these armored units had been moved north to participate in that action. (13) Between 20-29 December, however, information gathered from several intelligence sources indicated that these units were refitting in the Saarbrucken - Zweibrucken area, and heavy rail movement into the area was believed to signify the arrival of other large units. (14)

Based on all available intelligence data, the following German units were believed to be in contact or in reserve, on Seventh Army front during the last days of December: (15)

245th Volks Grenadier Division
256th Volks Grenadier Division
257th Volks Grenadier Division
361st Volks Grenadier Division
553rd Volks Grenadier Division
19th Infantry Division
36th Infantry Division
347th Infantry Division
17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division
21st Panzer Division
25th Panzer Grenadier Division

With the knowledge that the strength presented above was immediately available to the enemy, supplemented by

(13) A-1, p. 498; (14) A-1, p. 498; A-5, p. 11; (15) A-1, p. 498; A-5, p. 11.

reports of increased German patrol activity, (16) G-2, Seventh Army prepared an estimate of the situation, dated 29 December, in which the two most favored capabilities were as follows: (17)

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

"1. To attack south from the Bitche-Sarreguemines area with five to eight divisions with the initial objective of seizing Saverne and Ingwiller passes.

"3. With forces currently in contact and in immediate reserve, to launch a series of limited objective attacks."

While G-2 favored capability 3 on the basis that it seemed more logical from the standpoint of economizing forces and at the same time pinning down Seventh Army, he called attention to the reports of enemy build-up in the Saarbrucken area, and stated that confirmation of these reports would tend to favor capability 1. (18)

It is interesting to note that German documents captured later substantiated the fact that Capability 3 of this G-2 estimate, together with all data as to German forces available for the operation, was a correct analysis of the enemy situation and plans. (19)

Capability 3 closely conformed to the German plan for the northern wing of Operation "Nordwind", (See Map C) which was designed to seize the passes through the lower Vosges, and eliminate all Allied forces in the Alsace plain.

(16) A-1, p. 497; (17) A-1, p. 497; (18) A-2, Annex III, p. 6; (19) A-2, Annex V.

Friendly Forces and Dispositions

At the end of December, the following major units were located in the Seventh Army Zone: (20)

79th Infantry Division
45th Infantry Division
100th Infantry Division
44th Infantry Division
103rd Infantry Division
36th Infantry Division

12th Armored Division
14th Armored Division
2nd French Armored Division

Task Force Linden
Task Force Harris
Task Force Herren

The above mentioned task forces consisted primarily of the infantry elements of the 42nd, 63rd, and 70th Infantry Divisions. (21) These infantry regiments were newly arrived from the United States, and had not completed their full training program. It was originally intended that they be attached as separate regiments to various divisions where they would provide those divisions an opportunity to rotate their organic infantry for rest and refitting. (22) Because of a shortage of troops available to cover their extended sector, Seventh Army found it necessary at this time to form these units into task forces under the command of

(20) A-1, p. 496; (21) A-1, p. 495; (22) A-15, p. 333, 334.

their assistant division commanders, and employ them in a divisional role in what it was hoped would prove to be a relatively quiet sector. They were reinforced with such separate artillery units and service units as could be made available. (23)

As of 31 December, Seventh Army units were disposed as shown on Map B. Task Force Hudelson, on the left flank of VI Corps, consisted of elements of the 14th Armored Division. The regiments of Task Force Harris were at this time attached one each to the 44th and 100th Infantry Divisions, the remaining regiments being attached to the 3rd US Infantry Division, operating with the First French Army. XXI Corps, newly arrived in Seventh Army Zone, was designated as SHAEF reserve, together with the 36th Infantry Division and 12th Armored Division. (24)

Since it appeared that a major German counteroffensive was impending, Seventh Army had issued instructions that defenses be prepared in depth. VI Corps commenced the preparation of an alternate position in the Maginot Line fortifications. (25)

## THE GERMAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE

The German First Army launched the predicted counteroffensive during the night of 31 December - 1 January. It will add to the clarity of further discussion of the entire counteroffensive if it be considered as consisting of two separate actions, divided geographically, although to some

(23) A-1, p. 495; (24) A-6, p. 32; (25) A-1, p. 499.

extent they overlap chronologically.

The first of these actions may best be designated as the Vosges-Sarre attack. This attack was intended as the north wing of the German "Nordwind" operation, and had as its objective the seizure of the passes through the Vosges mountains. (26)

The second action will be referred to as the Alsace Plain attack, and consisted of a series of operations commencing 5 January. It had the dual objective of threatening the east flank of the VI Corps, and of forming the north wing of a thrust designed to recapture Strasbourg by a double envelopment. (27)

The Vosges-Sarre Attack

The Vosges-Sarre attack was spearheaded by the 17 SS Panzer Grenadier Division, supported by the 36th and 19th Infantry Divisions on the West, and the 559th, 361st and 256th Volks Grenadier Divisions on the east. (28) (See Map D)

The attack commenced as a double envelopment, hitting most strongly against the flanks of the 100th Infantry Division, and against the 44th Infantry Division and Task Force Hudelson. The 44th Division repulsed attacks against their left and center, but were driven back in the sector of the right regiment from 1000-3000 yards during the night and the early morning hours. (29) Counterattacks supported by armor were launched throughout the day by elements of the

(26) A-2, p. 2; (27) A-2, p. 2; (28) A-2, p. 4; (29) A-1, p. 563, 564.

44th but these efforts met with little success in the face of determined enemy resistance, and German attacks during the night of 1-2 January forced withdrawals of an additional 2000 yards near the right boundary. The German drive was temporarily contained at this point by elements of Task Force Harris. German attacks during both days had been supported by tanks and assault guns. While these assaults had been repulsed in several instances, the enemy had been more successful in conducting infiltration attacks during the night, and the principal gains had been made in this manner. (30) The ground was covered with snow at this time, and white uniformed assault groups were very hard to detect at night. (31)

During this same period, units on the left flank in the sector of the 100th Infantry Division had been under heavy frontal assault, but had successfully contained and repulsed these attacks in the area immediately north and northwest of Rimling. However, these defensive positions were threatened by attacks in the direction of Rimling, coming from the open left flank which had been exposed by the withdrawal of 44th Division units in that area. (32)

Strong enemy attacks continued against the 44th and 100th Division units in this sector throughout 2 January, and enemy elements penetrated to a point about one mile south of Gros Rederching. The Second French Armored Division had been assigned the mission of establishing a counter-reconnaissance screen on the approaches of the

(30) A-1, p. 565, 566; (31) A-10, p. 98; (32) A-10, p. 106-108.

Vosges Mountain passes. A German drive on 3 January succeeded in reaching Achen, 3 miles southwest of Gros Rederching, but a prompt counterattack by elements of Task Force Harris which were attached to the 100th Division, supported by tanks of the Second French Armored Division, recaptured the town. (33) The drive to Achen, which constituted a penetration of approximately five miles from the original battle position of 31 December, was the deepest penetration that the enemy was destined to achieve in this particular sector. Although further heavy fighting was to occur near Rimling, the appearance of strong armored reserves in the sector apparently discouraged the Germans from further attempts to break through at this location.

The German attack on the front of Task Force Hudelson and the right of the 100th Division was to achieve somewhat greater success for the enemy.

Task Force Hudelson consisted principally of an armored infantry battalion, less than two squadrons of mechanized cavalry, an artillery battalion and some engineer and tank destroyer support. The task force had been assigned a ten mile sector of hilly wooded terrain on the western slopes of the Lower Vosges. (34) It may easily be seen that the available troop strength was not sufficient to do more than screen the front of the assigned sector.

As in the case of the drive west of Rimling, previously discussed, the German attack began during the night of 31 December - 1 January. It consisted of an attack by two Ger-

(33) A-1, p. 567; (34) A-12, Chap. VIII.

man divisions, the 256th and 361st Volks Grenadier, and was directed against the entire front of the task force, with the main effort on the left, near the boundary between the XV and VI Corps. (35) Mechanized cavalry units in this sector were quickly driven back for distances of more than 2000 yards, exposing the right flank elements of the 100th Division which had also been attacked frontally. This exposed flank was immediately attacked by the enemy, but the 100th Division, employing reserve units, established a defensive line running generally south toward Lemberg. (36) Meanwhile, the cavalry units attempted to reorganize in the vicinity of Mouterhouse, and establish an east-west line, but found themselves partially surrounded before this plan could be put into effect, and further withdrawals of 2000-3000 yards were made. (37)

When the enemy attack drove in the units on the west flank of Task Force Hudelson, this forced a series of withdrawals by the other elements of the task force progressing from left to right across the front to the vicinity of Neunhoffen, where the infantry units on the right of the sector, assisted by the 45th Infantry Division, were able to hold the shoulder of the salient. (38)

The German drive had carried to a depth of 9000 yards during the action of 1 January, considerably extending the reserve elements of the 100th Division which had been employed on the flank exposed by this action. It was quickly apparent from the speed with which the German successes

(35) A-1, p. 570-571; (36) A-10, p. 102; (37) A-1, p. 571; (38) A-1, p. 571, 572.

were achieved during the early morning hours of 1 January that Task Force Hudelson lacked the strength necessary to contain the attack in their sector. VI and XV Corps therefore moved quickly to take such steps as were necessary to protect their flanks and stop the German drive.

Seventh Army released one combat team of the 36th Division to XV Corps, to be used in protecting the corps right flank. This combat team was attached to the 100th Infantry Division and was employed to extend the line from slightly north of Lemberg to a point about 3 miles to the south of the village, relieving elements of the 100th Division in the vicinity of Lemberg. The relief was commenced on the night of 1-2 January. (39)

45th Division had meanwhile commenced the movement of the reserve regiment to the VI Corps left flank. This regiment relieved elements of Task Force Hudelson along a line running east and west through a point about one mile south of Mouterhouse. The task force although badly battered, had finally succeeded in establishing a defensive position in this area. This relief was completed on 2 January. (40) The 45th Division also committed an additional infantry regiment which had been attached from Task Force Herren in the area southwest of Neuhoffen. This regiment succeeded in holding Phillipsbourg and relieved infantry elements of Task Force Hudelson in that area late on 1 January. (41) In addition, troops from the 79th Division were moved into the area north of Reipertswiller to block further enemy ad-

(39) A-9, p. 3; (40) A-1, p. 572-573; (41) A-14, p. 134.

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(39) A-9, p. 3; (40) A-1, p. 572-573; (41) A-14, p. 134.

order to control any critical situation which might arise on XV Corps front. This authorization did not constitute a rescission of the directive for the establishment of a SHAEF reserve of two divisions and a corps headquarters, however, and Seventh Army was faced with the problem of reconstituting this reserve as soon as possible. (45)

The German drive in the salient had not yet been completely stopped even though the defenses in the Alsace Plain had been considerably weakened to provide troops for this purpose. This fact now made it necessary that some withdrawals be made in the eastern part of VI Corps sector. A 6th Army Group letter of instructions dated 28 December ad-

(42) A-1, p. 572; (43) A-1, p. 573; (44) A-1, p. 573;
(45) A-1, p. 580.

dressed to both the Seventh Army and the First French Army had outlined a plan for a series of withdrawals back to a main defense position along the eastern edge of the Lower Vosges range. Seventh Army directed such a withdrawal be commenced on 2 January. A series of three delaying positions were planned before occupying the main Vosges position on 5 January. (46) VI Corps units withdrew to Maginot line positions extending from Ft. Louis, on the Rhine, north and northwest through the Haguenau Forest to Drachenhronn and west to the shoulder of the Bitche salient in the vicinity of Dambach. (47) (See Map E)

The planned withdrawal brought an immediate protest from the French authorities in Strasbourg, since the completion of the plan would bring about the evacuation of Strasbourg. The Commanding General, 6th Army Group, reiterated that the withdrawal to the Vosges line would be completed in accordance with the desires of the Supreme Commander, in spite of "pressure, political or otherwise, to continue to hold Strasbourg." (48)

On 3 January, however General De Gaulle called on the Supreme Commander, and pointed out that Strasbourg was a symbol to the French people. He further stated that its loss might result in rear area disturbances. In consideration of the effect that rear area unrest might have upon Allied supply lines at this critical time, the Supreme Commander modified the instructions to 6th Army Group to the effect that Strasbourg would be held. (49)

(46) A-1, p. 579, 580; (47) A-1, p. 461; (48) A-1, p. 581, 582; (49) A-15, p. 362, 363.

Seventh Army received notification of this change in instructions on 3 January. It was decided that the Maginot line position which formed the first delaying position would be organized, and that certain switch positions to the rear of this line would be prepared for occupation in the event of a forced withdrawal behind the Maginot positions. (50)

The decision to hold in the Maginot line and to defend Strasbourg was perhaps the best possible compromise between military and political considerations. It was unfortunate, however that this plan was decided upon only after the withdrawal had been commenced, since considerable effort had already been expended by service troops and reserve elements in preparation of positions further to rear. These efforts, had they been concentrated on the Maginot position, might have resulted in a stronger and more easily defended line.

Throughout 3 and 4 January, the enemy launched heavy attacks in an effort to further enlarge or break out of the Bitche salient. (See Map D) Since this salient already threatened the left anchor of the new defensive position in the Alsace plain, 45th Division planned counterattacks designed to eliminate it, but these met with little or no success. German units succeeded in infiltrating in strength into Wingen and the area to the east toward Reipertswiller, and heavy fighting ensued in an attempt to eliminate these forces. (51)

During the next three days, the weight of the enemy attacks gradually subsided, and in the latter part of this

(50) A-1, p. 582; (51) A-14, p. 135.

period, the 45th Division and attached units were able to make slow progress in their counterattacks. Wingen was cut off on 5 January, and cleared the following day (52), and the enemy was forced back about one mile north of Reipertswiller on 7 January. (53)

The perimeter of the Bitche salient was now well defined, and few changes were to take place during the remainder of the action. While the initiative in the salient had been wrested from the German forces, they were determined to defend all of their gains, and had organized their positions strongly. (54) In addition, the enemy had sufficient strength to launch strong counterattacks for the purpose of keeping Seventh Army units off balance.

During the period 10-15 January, 45th Division attempted several attacks which were at best only partially successful. One of these attacks, launched by the left flank regiment on 11 January, made gains of approximately one mile and recaptured one village, but after three days of bitter, indecisive action, the attack was called off. (55)

Another regimental attack was attempted on 14 January, moving north from the line Reipertswiller-Obermulthal. One battalion of this force was counterattacked and the rifle companies were cut off after an advance of 2000 yards. Attempts to make contact with this force resulted in the isolation of two more companies. Repeated attempts to reach the isolated units failed, as did an attempt by the group to break out to the rear on 20 January. Only two men succeeded

(52) A-14, p. 135; (53) A-1, p. 575; (54) A-14, p. 135; (55) A-1, p. 586.

in infiltrating back to the remainder of the regiment. (56)

Several changes in troop dispositions had been effected by Seventh Army during the period under discussion. The 36th Division, of which one combat team had been attached to the 100th Infantry Division, was given a defensive sector on the right flank of the 100th, effective 10 January. (57) This sector was to be defended with one RCT, the bulk of the Division remaining in XV Corps reserve. The division, along with the XXI Corps and the 12th Armored Division, had been released from SHAEF reserve on 7 January.

XXI Corps was assigned a defensive sector on the Seventh Army left, allowing XV Corps to concentrate on the critical Lower Vosges area. (58)

The critical situation on the east side of the Bitche salient made it desirable that an experienced division occupy this sector. After the withdrawals to the Maginot line in the Rhine plain, the sector had been occupied by the infantry regiments of Task Force Herren under the operational control of 79th Infantry Division. Therefore during the period 13-17 January, the 103rd Division was moved to the Bitche salient and was relieved on the Army left flank by Task Force Herren. (59) This shift, while it involved considerable lateral movement through the Vosges over a limited road net, served to relieve the 79th Division of responsibility for a portion the Vosges-Sarre sector at a time when they were heavily engaged in the Alsace Plain, an action which will be discussed in the next section.

(56) A-14, p. 139-145; (57) A-1, p. 583; (58) A-1, p. 583, 584; (59) A-1, p. 587-589, 980, 981.

## THE ALSACE PLAIN ATTACK

As a part of their overall plan for the counteroffensive, the Germans had included a series of operations in the Alsace Plain, and along Seventh Army's extended Rhine Flank. It was originally intended that these operations pin down Seventh Army troops on the east flank, preventing their employment in the battles to the west of the Lower Vosges which have previously been discussed. (60) However, as the enemy saw that his opportunity for a major breakthrough to Saverne had been successfully blocked by the American forces, the weight of the attack was shifted eastward into the plain, and the actions which took place there were a series of bitter clashes designed to recapture Strasbourg. (See Map E)

The First German Army controlled the units which were to launch attacks from the area south of Wissembourg, and the units which were to attack from east of the Rhine River were a part of Army Group Oberrhein. (61)

As discussed in the previous section, VI Corps units operating in the Alsace plain withdrew to positions in the Maginot line on 2-3 January in order to shorten the front, and conserve troops. This line, which had been intended as the first delaying position, became the main battle position because of the decision that Strasbourg would be defended. (62)

Defense of the long Rhine flank had been assigned to Task Forces Linden and Herren during the last days of Decem-

(60) A-2, Annex V, p. 2, 3; (61) A-2, Annex V, p. 2;
(62) A-1, p. 579 - 582.

ber. Because of the rapid advances of the enemy on the VI Corps left during 1-2 January, units of Task Force Herren had been rapidly transferred to that area to assist in containing the attack. (63) Concurrently, Task Force Linden was attached to the 79th Infantry Division, and was given responsibility for the sector evacuated by Task Force Herren in addition to that which it held in front of Strasbourg, extending its frontage to a total of 31 miles. The defense of such a frontage was obviously beyond the capabilities of the Task Force. Therefore, the 79th Division, having completed the withdrawal to the Maginot position, undertook to achieve a more reasonable disposition of troop strength by a series of shifts during 4-5 January. (64) Unfortunately, this redisposition of units was still in progress when the German attacks commenced.

Organization on the Rhine flank was further modified when on 5 January, the 6th Army Group placed the First French Army in command of the Strasbourg sector, moving the boundary between armies north of that city. Relief of American units in this sector was not completed until late on 7 January. (65)

German activity in the sector commenced in the early hours of 5 January when elements of the 553rd Volks Grenadier Division crossed the Rhine at various points along a 7 mile front extending from a point about one mile south of Gambsheim north to Drusenheim.

Units in this sector attempted two counterattacks on 5

(63) A-1, p. 587; (64) A-1, p. 592-594; (65) A-1, p. 591.

January, but both met with little success. As previously mentioned, a redisposition of troops was under way at this time and the attack groups were a mixture of companies and battalions from different regiments. Failure of the counterattacks was at least partly caused by a lack of coordination resulting from the confused organization. (66)

On the following day 3 American attacks were directed against the bridgehead. 79th Division units succeeded in reaching Drusenheim, but were not able to advance farther. Gambsheim was attacked from the west and southwest. The attack from the west succeeded in partially clearing Gambsheim but these units were forced to withdraw by an enemy counterattack. (67)

On this same day, German units were observed to be building up in the area south of Wissembourg, in front of the Maginot line positions. The 21st Panzer Division was identified in this area, and the appearance of this unit previously identified in the Vosges sector was a strong indication that the enemy main effort was being shifted to the Alsace plain. (68)

German offensive activity in the bridgehead increased on 7 January. Enemy attacks supported by tank and assault guns forced withdrawals of 79th Division units in the area around Drusenheim. (69) This date also marked the start of the German assault on the Maginot positions to the north. 79th Division outposts were driven back from 3 small villages northeast of Hatten, and strong attacks were launched against

(66) A-1, p. 594, 595; (67) A-1, p. 596, 597; (68) A-2, p. 5; (69) A-1, p. 598, 599.

the main battle position but these attacks were repulsed. (70)

During the period 8-10 January, heavy fighting took place in both sectors. One combat command of the 12th Armored Division arrived in the VI Corps sector on 7 January, the remainder of the division arriving the following day. A task force from the division attacked Herrlisheim from the north on 9 January, and armored infantry units succeeded in entering the town, but tank elements were held up by a series of blown bridges. These units suffered heavy losses in the attack from the enemy infantry and armored units operating in the town, and were isolated by German infiltration during the night. Tank reinforcements reached the town on 10 January, but heavy casualties inflicted on the infantry elements precluded further offensive action, and the task force was ordered to withdraw west of the Zorn River after nightfall. (71)

Units in the Hatten area to the north were also heavily engaged during this period. A series of attacks north of Hatten were repulsed on 8 January. On 9 January two heavy attacks were directed at Hatten. The first of these, commencing early in the day, was repulsed, but a second attack launched 1300 and supported by 25 or 30 tanks partially surrounded Hatten. Armored units by passing that town reached the area south of Rittershoffen. Counterattacks by infantry elements of Task Force Linden forced an enemy withdrawal to the eastern edge of Hatten, but all efforts to

(70) A-1, p. 601, 602; (71) A-14, p. 46, 47.

dislodge German forces from this point on 9 and 10 January were repulsed. Units of 25th Panzer Grenadier Division moved from the Vosges sector took part in the action in the latter part of the period. (72)

After the withdrawal of 12th Armored Division units from Herrlisheim, the bridgehead sector remained quiet for several days, with no decisive action attempted by either force. This same period, however, was that of the most violent action in the Hatten-Rittershoffen sector.

Taking advantage of bad weather and poor visibility, enemy troops infiltrated in strength into Rittershoffen on 11 January, during the course of heavy fighting around Hatten. Following this infiltration, armored attacks isolated forces of the 79th Division in both Hatten and Rittershoffen. (73)

Counterattacks during 11-12 January by units of the 14th Armored Division made contact with the isolated forces in Rittershoffen, but did not succeed in reaching Hatten. (74)

Heavy fighting continued in Rittershoffen throughout 13 and 14 January, with the enemy regaining his positions after a tank-infantry attack had almost cleared the town. By this time, all three combat commands of the 14th Armored Division were committed to action. The enemy also had continued to reinforce the sector, as units of the 7th Parachute Division, recently moved from Holland, were identified. An attack from the west by 14th Armored units finally made contact with the isolated units in Hatten, but indecisive

(72) A-1, p. 602, 603; (73) A-1, p. 603, 604; (74) A-12, Chap. IX.

action continued through 14 January. Action subsided in Rittershoffen on 15 January, but heavy fighting continued in Hatten. By the end of the day, units of the 14th Armored and 79th Divisions had cleared the southern and western sections of Hatten.

German offensive action in the Hatten sector decreased during the next few days, but enemy positions within the salient were stubbornly maintained. (75)

Following a relatively inactive period in the bridgehead sector, the 12th Armored Division resumed offensive operations in that area on 15 January, attacking with one combat command from the west, and another from the south and east. The attack from the west succeeded in establishing a bridgehead across the Zorn River, but was stopped short of Herrlisheim by stiffening resistance. Infantry elements of the other combat command succeeded in reaching Herrlisheim the following day, but a counterattack isolated this force, and during the course of this action 200 men were captured. The tank battalion met with even greater misfortune. Contact with this unit was broken at noon on 17 January and all tanks were lost in the ensuing action. Reconnaissance by division artillery liaison aircraft later established the fact that 14 of these tanks had been knocked out immediately east of Herrlisheim, and the remaining 15 which took part in the attack were listed as missing. (76)

(75) A-1, p. 504-506; (76) A-18, p. 47, 48.

Reserve units of the 12th Armored Division attempted to make contact with the isolated units in Herrlisheim on 18 January, but were repulsed. During the course of the action, all tank and infantry units had suffered severe losses, and a tank battalion and an infantry battalion had been nearly destroyed. In view of this situation, forward elements of the division were withdrawn to defensive positions on the west bank of the Zorn River during the night of 18-19 January, and plans were made for the relief of the division by the 36th Infantry Division. (77)

German units of the 10th SS Panzer Division attacked at 1800 on 19 January, but two regiments of the 36th Infantry Division, completing relief of the 12th Armored units by 2100 hours, were successful in containing the attack, which was repulsed with heavy losses in armor. (78)

With the lessening of enemy activity in the Hatten-Rittershoffen area, there were indications of a German buildup to the south between the Haguenau Forest and the Rhine.

It seemed apparent that the Germans intended to attack south along the Rhine, and north from the bridgehead in an effort to link up all enemy forces operating in the Alsace plain.

German forces succeeded in carrying out this plan in a series of actions conducted between 16 and 19 January. Attacks in the direction of Bessenheim were launched by units operating from the bridgehead and from the plain to the

(77) A-1, p. 608-610; (78) A-1, p. 610; A-13, p. 48;

north. Elements of 7th Parachute Division, earlier identified in the vicinity of Hatten, participated in these attacks. During the course of the action, Sessenheim changed hands several times, but counterattacking VI Corps units were unable to consolidate their gains and were forced to withdraw in each case, usually after suffering heavy losses. (79)

In an effort to stabilize the situation, 3 infantry battalions of the 103rd Division were brought into the sector from the west flank of the Corps front. (80) Following unsuccessful attacks by these units on 19 January, all troops in the sector were ordered to take up defensive positions, but continued enemy pressure prevented the closing of a gap in the defensive line in the area south of Sessenheim. (81)

At this time, VI Corps was faced with a serious defensive problem, since almost all available strength had been committed, and the German attack was not as yet contained. The enemy had demonstrated his ability to reinforce his units opposing Seventh Army, as evidenced by the arrival of such major formations as 6th SS Mountain Division, 10th SS Panzer Division, and 7th Parachute Division.

In view of the situation, it was decided to withdraw to a new defensive line based principally upon the Moder River, and this withdrawal was carried out on 20 and 21 January. (See Map F) Adoption of this plan enabled VI Corps to correct a confused organization for combat which had arisen out of the necessity for committing whatever force

(79) A-1, p. 610-613; (80) A-11, p. 63, 64; (81) A-1, p. 612, 613.

was immediately available from their meager reserve to cope with each German threat as it occurred.

The new line was hinged to the Moder slightly east of Bischwiller, and extended northwest along the river to Pfaffenhoffen, following the Rothbach River from that point to the vicinity of Reipertswiller. Units were disposed along this line from left to right in the order 45th Division, 103rd Division, 79th Division and 36th Division. Units of Task Force Linden were attached to the 79th Division. (82)

The withdrawal apparently had caught the enemy off balance, as VI Corps forces were not immediately followed up, and only the 36th Division, which had not been affected by the withdrawal, remained in close contact with the German forces. On 21 January the 36th Division repulsed two tank thrusts and one infiltration attempt. (83)

By 24 January the enemy had succeeded in regrouping his forces in front of the Moder line. Identifications secured at that time indicated that elements of 9 German Divisions were in contact or in reserve. (84)

The German attack commenced on the night of 24-25 January, and developed as three principal thrusts. One of these occurred to the northwest in the sector of the 103rd Division, and the other two on either side of Haguenau in an attempt to isolate that city by a double envelopment. The Germans were successful in forcing crossings of the river in all three areas, and bitter fighting took place throughout 25 January. All of the attacks were contained

(82) A-1, p. 613-616; (83) A-1, p. 617; (84) A-1, p. 617, 619.

and a counterattack against the German units south of Haguenau surrounded several enemy groups and forced the remainder of the German units to withdraw across the river. (85)

The 79th Division regrouped elements of Task Force Linden and organic units in the area northwest of Haguenau, and launched a counterattack on the morning of 26 January to restore the river defense line. No opposition was encountered as the enemy had withdrawn across the river during the night. (86)

This withdrawal marked the end of the German offensive on Seventh Army front. It had become apparent to the enemy that Strasbourg could not be recaptured in the face of the delaying action conducted by Seventh Army, nor was there any possibility of a breakthrough to the lower Vosges passes. German documents obtained after the war state that casualties had averaged 3000 to 4000 in the Volks Grenadier divisions and 2000 to 3000 in the Panzer and Panzer Grenadier Divisions. (87) There were no other objectives in the area commensurate to the losses that were being sustained.

## ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In reviewing this operation, several features stand out and may be considered worthy of further discussion.

Accurate combat intelligence, as developed by Seventh Army G-2, was of considerable assistance to the army commander in planning counter measures against the German offensive. While it is true that G-2 favored the enemy capability of

(85) A-1, p. 621; (86) A-1, p. 620; (87) A-2, Annex V, p. 10.

launching a series of limited objective attacks for the purpose of pinning down Seventh Army units, he nevertheless strongly presented the capability of the Germans to conduct a major offensive.

Such reserves as the army was able to assemble were well disposed to meet with any penetration, and armored units had been assigned the missions of establishing counter-reconnaissance screens in the rear of possible areas of penetrations and of preparing counterattack plans.

The ten mile sector of rugged terrain east of Bitche, assigned to Task Force Hudelson, was too lightly held. This task force had only one battalion of infantry, and slightly more than a squadron of mechanized cavalry, a force insufficient to defend ten miles of rugged terrain against a strong infantry attack, utilizing infiltration methods. The task force itself can scarcely be blamed for its rapid disintegration in view of the situation with which it was faced.

The prompt reaction of the VI Corps to the gap in the line created by the defeat of Task Force Hudelson was commendable. Within the space of a few hours, sufficient troops had been brought into position to contain the penetration. In several cases, these units had been in contact with the enemy on other sectors of the front, and the speed with which they were able to disengage and move was outstanding. The entire situation on the VI Corps front would have been strengthened had the withdrawal to the Maginot positions been effected in the latter part of December.

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such a withdrawal be made, and the 6th Army Group had been instructed to assemble as SHAEF reserve a force consisting of a corps headquarters and two divisions. No major infantry reserves were available to VI Corps, and such a force could be formed only by a withdrawal to a shorter line. As it turned out, the withdrawal was not made until the movement of the units to the critical sector east of Bitche made the original corps front untenable and the establishment of a shorter front became mandatory. As a result of a lack of a strong infantry reserve assembled under one commander, the VI Corps was forced to send infantry battalions and regiments from each of the several divisions into the Bitche sector. This procedure of hastily forming forces for counter-attacks from the forces of several divisions persisted throughout the remainder of the defensive operation. While it is recognized that the procedure was partly one of necessity, produced by extended frontages and limited infantry strength, the condition might have been alleviated had a reserve infantry force been available at the start of the operation.

The redisposition of Seventh Army forces was somewhat hampered by the conflict between military and political considerations in regard to the defense of Strasbourg. It had been made quite clear by echelons of command superior to Seventh Army that the withdrawal was to be made to a line in the rear of the city, and this withdrawal had been ordered and was in progress when the decision was reversed for political reasons. As a result of the change, a somewhat

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confused organization existed in that area for several days, and this confusion was in part responsible for the failure to execute a prompt counterattack against the Gambsheim bridgehead.

It is not the purpose of this discussion to question the final decision to hold Strasbourg. It is believed, however, that had the political aspect of the situation been considered originally, the confusion resulting from the change of decision might have been avoided.

The choice of the 12th Armored Division to conduct the counterattack against the Gambsheim bridgehead is open to question. The terrain is low and swampy and is traversed by many small tributary streams of the Moder, Zorn and Rhine Rivers. An attack by a unit of considerable infantry strength would have been preferable, in view of the terrain and weather, and the 36th Infantry Division, which at the time had only one regimental combat team committed on the XV Corps front, was available. As it turned out, it was necessary to commit the 36th Division in relief of the 12th Armored Division after the latter had suffered heavy losses.

The withdrawal of the VI Corps to the Moder River line was successfully completed on schedule in spite of difficulties introduced by bad weather. Troops assigned screening and demolition missions executed these missions well, and the enemy was apparently taken by surprise, since the follow-up was slow. VI Corps was also enabled to regroup their units in a more efficient manner on the new front.

All phases of this operation serve to illustrate the

advantage of the initiative which rests with the attacker. Seventh Army was not markedly inferior in personnel and equipment to the attacking German force. It must have been obvious to the enemy, however, that the Seventh Army was incapable of major offensive action because of the general situation existing on the western front at the time. The German force took maximum advantage of this situation, although in the end they failed in the achievement of any of their major objectives. The German failure was largely caused by the mobility of the Seventh Army forces, which permitted the rapid movement of reserves to sectors where breakthrough was imminent.

## LESSONS

1. In organizing for defense, salients should be eliminated from the main battle position.

2. A river line can add strength to a defensive position, but its value in this respect should not be overestimated.

3. Combat intelligence developed at army level should be disseminated throughout the lower echelons.

4. Consideration should be given to the impact of political factors on military decisions during the first stages of planning a large scale operation.

5. Infiltration tactics are highly effective, particularly in mountainous terrain and under conditions of bad weather and poor visibility.

6. Infiltration tactics are effective in gaining

limited objectives through lightly defended sectors.

7. Mechanized cavalry is not a suitable force for employment in front line positions in a sustained defensive operation.

8. Careful planning and good lateral communications are required to prevent the exposure of the flanks of adjacent units during a withdrawal.

9. Camouflaged uniforms and equipment are of assistance in gaining surprise.

10. Extended periods of cloudy, overcast weather assist the force which is relatively weaker in air power.

11. Prompt counterattacks against penetrations are an essential element of a successful defense. Such counterattacks may best be achieved through prior planning.

12. All forces, including interior units must plan for the protection of their flanks and rear.

13. Careful planning of screening and delaying action are essential for the conduct of a successful withdrawal.

14. A high degree of mobility for reserve forces greatly assists the defender.

15. Defensive operations should be planned to provide adequate infantry reserves for all echelons of command.

16. Defensive forces are highly vulnerable to attack during periods when they are reorganizing and regrouping.

17. Attacking forces in low swampy terrain should consist primarily of infantry, rather than tanks.

18. Experienced units should be used in the defense of critical sectors in preference to untried troops, if the

defender has a choice in the matter.

19. In most respects, the advantage of the initiative rests with the attacker. The defender, however, may partially neutralize this advantage by his choice of the main battle position.